

Swampdonkey M50

by Rob Tardik



On Road Test this issue is the Swampdonkey (love the name!!) M50 guitar amp, the debut product designed by amp builder Chris Czech who proudly builds these beauties right here in Canada. (It even says that on the back of the amp!)

The M50 is a pure tube, all handmade, boutique-class guitar amp built for the discriminating guitarist. It's the kind of amp that just exudes an aura upon first glance that nothing has been compromised in its build quality – and I can assure you, NOTHING HAS. Basically, this head is built to last forever, and even comes with one serious ATA flight case included to protect your musical investment. (Great touch, Chris!)

The single-channel class AB head is rated at 50 watts and comes with two 12AX7 preamp tubes, a 12AT7 phase inverter, and two 6LGC power output tubes in adjustable fixed bias, all well-spaced with good ventilation. The power section uses a solid state rectifier for loud, punchy, responsive output. The amp is extremely flexible tube-wise, and can be ramped up easily to Class A operation with a simple bias adjustment.

The front panel features recessed vintage-style knobs that feel really solid to the touch and are moulded plastic with solid brass inserts. The control shafts are all solid metal. The amp starts with the standard Drive knob for gain control but then features a unique and very versatile Voice six-position rotary-type dial that gives you more EQ/tonal options. It ranges from Crisp, Bright, Full, Natural, Warm, and Fat. I enjoyed all the settings but really dug the Natural, Warm, and Fat settings the best to my musical tastes – fat and real punchy! Great for clean Carlton-esque funky jazz lines.

Moving on, the amp features the classic Blackface-inspired styled tone stack that has your familiar Treble, Mid, Bass,

and Volume controls, with a Master volume. All EQ controls are very smooth and ultra-responsive to even marginal tonal tweaking, shifting well through their respective tonal frequencies. This is an area where I find more budget-conscious amps feel very vague at times.

Taking a look at the just-as-important backside of the amp, you'll find an auxiliary send level control and send/return jacks for your non-signal boosting effects like reverbs and delay, the Boost function footswitch (included) 4-pin DIN jack, two speaker output jacks, a 3-way selector knob for choosing various speaker cabs (4-ohm, 8-ohm, 16-ohm), and finally the main power switch, fuse holder, and AC cord socket.

The sound? Well, being a Fender guitar guy, I used my old modded Stratocaster with high-output humbucking pickups, my new '52 custom shop Telecaster, and my 50th Anniversary Stratocaster with noiseless single-coil pickups through a closed-back Mesa Boogie 2 x 12" cab with two Vintage 30 Celestions. The overriding impression this amp left with me was one of power, body, and massive volume, even with my single-coils. This is one loud, classic-sounding amp! But is it ever quiet (wow, silence in an amp – what a concept). This is due, I'm sure, to those high-grade metal film resistors Czech is using, and again, those monster transformers bring on massive, clean headroom. I can also imagine what a thrilling and gut-moving experience I would have had running a 4 x 12" cab from the Swampdonkey!

My '52 Telecaster and 50th Anniversary guitars went over best with this amp, exhibiting stunning clarity and sensitivity by responding well to my playing dynamics, with me using my volume knob to vary its voice during higher settings of the Drive control. Its strength is in delivering clear, wide, blooming-type sound with tight, punchy lows (never

boomy), a thumping, articulate mid-range, and glittery, yet nicely-recessed highs. Note that separation is clear, very articulate, and will keep your playing humble – so get practicing those picking exercises, folks.

In short, you get broad, spanking, in-your-face dynamics across a frequency spectrum that's very flattering to rock, country, and funk/blues-type guitar. With that in mind, the amp also handles gain boosting/distortion pedals in front like a charm, so there's not much in these fields that this amp can't do. High-gain players please note, though, that I could not squeeze out the compressed tone I was after with the Stratocaster-plus high-output pickups, but that was not what this amp was intended for. My one wish for this amp would be a power dampening-type control, as the trend these days is toward downsizing and a control like this would be nice for dialing down the volume controls to retain headroom at lower volumes.

For more info on this and other upcoming amps Czech is working on, please visit www.swampdonkeyamps.com.

Rob Tardik is a guitarist, contemporary artist, teacher, and clinician who performs regularly throughout the Greater Toronto Area and was voted 2007 Established Performing Artist of the Year in Mississauga, ON. Rob is currently working on his second follow-up CD to his debut Without Words and is also the inventor of the Music Stamp Series: a series of educational accessories for teachers/students and working musicians. For more information, visit www.robtdik.com or e-mail Rob at rt@robtdik.com.

Manufacturer's Comment

We've changed the speaker outputs to three (one each: 4-, 8-, and 16-ohm) and eliminated the speaker impedance switch. Regarding Rob's desire for power dampening and the trend toward lower output amps: we had been considering building essentially an "M25" specifically for the reasons Rob mentions, but the M50 accepts 6V6 output tubes for a lower output around 22 watts with noticeably greater sustain when opened up. EL34 and KT66 output tubes may also be used. In addition to your choice of output tubes (KT66 at a slight premium), we also will perform minor mods and tweaks as desired by new owners at no additional charge.

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